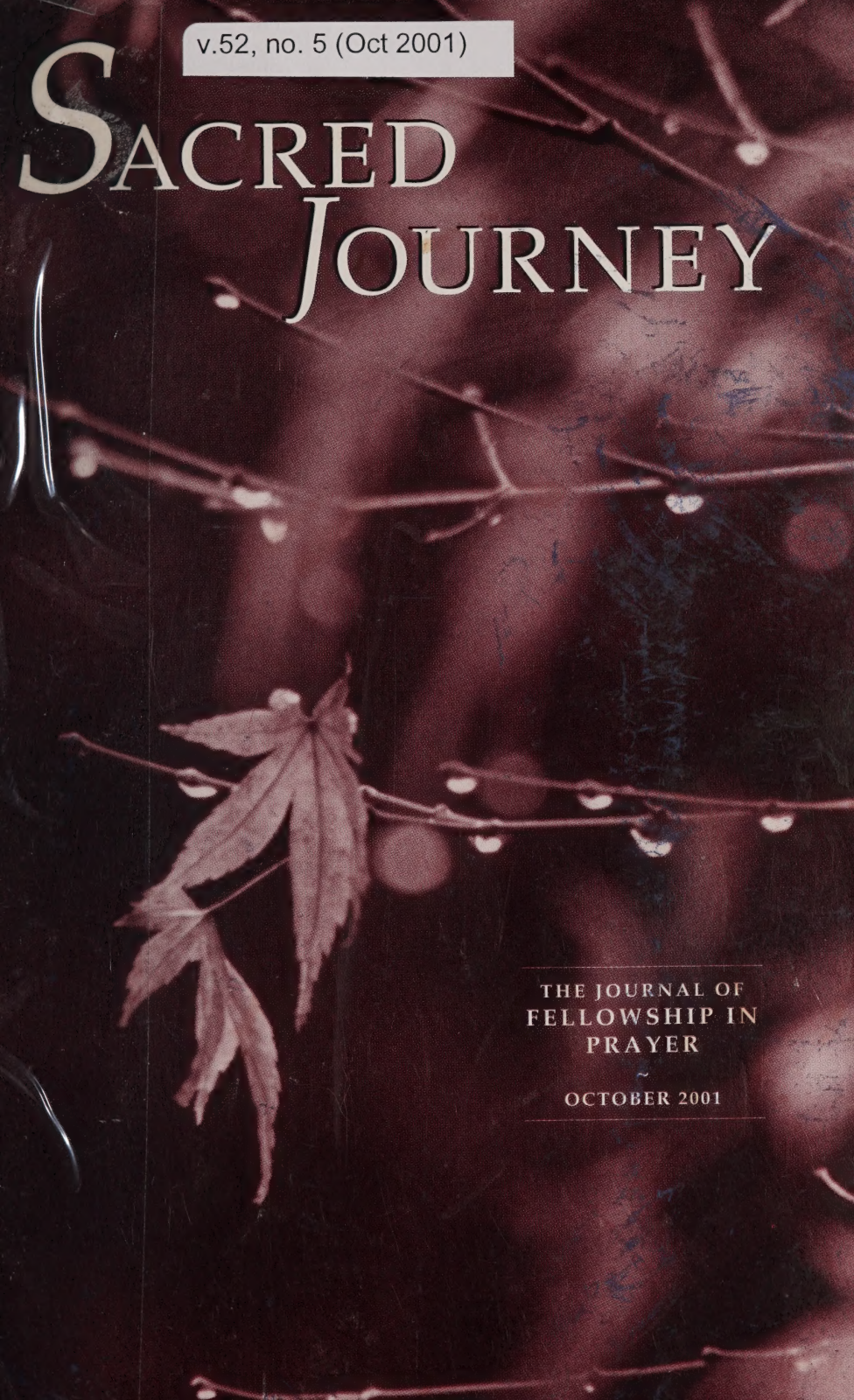
v.52, no. 5 (Oct 2001)

SACRED JOURNEY



THE JOURNAL OF
FELLOWSHIP IN
PRAYER

OCTOBER 2001

SACRED JOURNEY®

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER

The mission of Fellowship in Prayer is

to encourage and support

a spiritual orientation to life,

to promote the practice of

prayer,

meditation,

and service to others,

and to help bring about

a deeper spirit of unity

among humankind.

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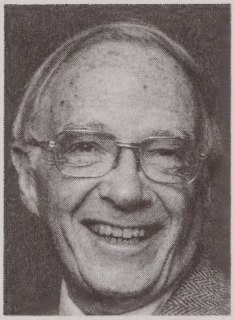
Cover photo by Robert Campbell.

THIS IS THE MOMENT TO FALL IN LOVE



In his most recent book, *The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love You Need,* Dr. Gerald May (who will deliver a keynote address at Fellowship in Prayer's "Companions on the Sacred Journey" conference in Princeton next June 14, 15, 16) tells us that, "The contemplative way acknowledges that we begin to appreciate love's fullness only as we enter it immediately, directly, and with undefended awareness . . . being appreciatively and responsively right here and now."

How hard that is! To be totally immersed in the present moment, just as it's happening, right here, right now! Most of the time the present moment, in all its vibrant newness and aliveness—saturated as it is with the loving presence of God—is contaminated by a flood of debris from the past or obscured by a cloud of thoughts, feelings, hopes, desires, fears, irrelevancies, and fantasies about the future. At least, that's the way it is, far too often, with me.

Over the years, I've tried a variety of ways to bring my wandering mind back to THIS moment—in all its

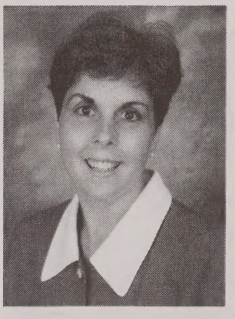
fullness: Zen, Vipassana, and Tibetan Buddhism, mantras, prayers—you name it. These are all wonderful contemplative practices, but they can often seem somewhat mechanical or contrived.

Wouldn't it be wonderful, I thought, if without thought or effort we could simply accept the gift to BE in this moment—just as it is, without adding anything to it—no regrets, no fantasies, no wishing it to be different in any way—fully accepting it in all its God-given wonder and uniqueness.

Actually, that's been happening to me more and more often as time goes by. Suddenly, a space will open up in the clutter of my mind, and I am saturated with a wave of gratitude. Often wordless or simply, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," the feeling is akin to being in love—in love with the beautiful sycamore that's waving and whispering to me outside my window, with my life, my wife and daughter, with all sentient beings.

As "Jerry" May says, "contemplative appreciation is the fullest possible realization of love. The contemplative moments that come to us all as flashes of immediate presence are glimpses of the way life yearns to be lived. They are hints of the vast, graceful gift of love that has already been given to the family of humanity." The presence of God—who is love—is within us and saturates every part of this sacred universe. May we recognize and accept these graced moments of "immediate awareness," as Jerry May calls them, with ever greater frequency.

THE EARLY BIRD



I'm a night owl not an early bird, but one morning I awoke at dawn. With the coffee brewing I stepped to the window. There against the grey-tinted dawn, a great blue heron perched ready to feast from our well-stocked backyard fish pond. She was a feathered wonder standing on stick legs. After a few moments, she turned her regal neck and locked eyes with me. After a pause to survey me, she unfurled her wide wings and ascended slowly to my neighbor's roof. I poured my coffee and we spent some long moments watching each other. Eventually she flew away.

Now I know that the heron was just a bird in my backyard looking for food, but that's not all she was. Mythically, the heron is a symbol of morning, longevity, and regeneration; her feathers depict a quality of silence. For me, her visit became a portent of new beginnings, my talisman of hope. The heron's visit came at a time when my daughter was ill and my life had been turned upside down. Somehow, this wondrous water bird reminded me that if I attended to each day, gratefully tending to my life and doing just what I knew to do, then all would be well.

The heron's visit was a graced moment, one that fills me with gratitude whenever I recall it.

Cultivating gratitude is a key aspect of the spiritual life. And there is no better person to speak on gratitude than Benedictine David Steindl-Rast. In "Practicing Gratitude," Henry Stark's interview with Brother David, he says, "Ninety-nine percent of the time during the day we have the opportunity to be grateful for something. We just don't notice it. We go through our days in a daze." During my heron encounter I was wide awake and ever so grateful.

Call this attitude of gratitude what you will, but it is closely entwined with what Gerald G. May labels "contemplative moments" when we are immersed in the reality of life as it is. In "The Life of the Heart," Dr. May explores the meaning of love and admonishes, "Only open your hands, receive the gift."

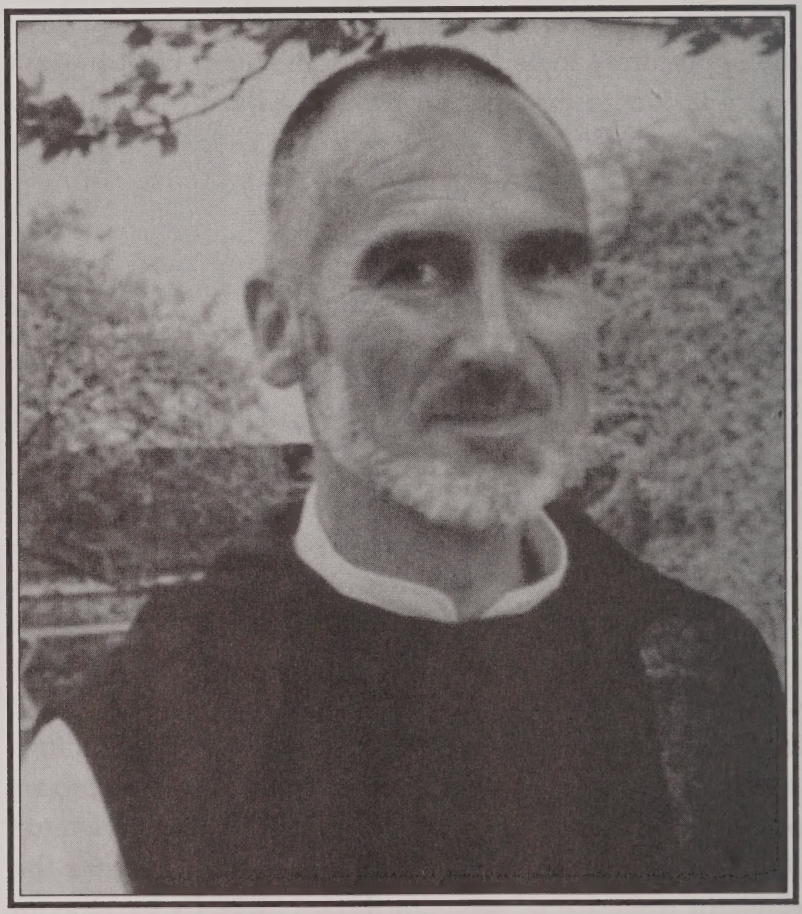
Richard Bauman writes, in "Paper Prayers," that "gratitude lists" are a powerful way to cultivate thankfulness, a quality that most of us could use in larger quantities.

In *A Transforming Experience,* Carolyn Shilling retraces her struggle to choose the right healing path to follow when diagnosed with cancer a second time.

Ivan G. Nassar describes the spiritual practice of fasting observed by Muslims worldwide in "Celebrate Ramadan." Donna Schaper focuses on how we can guard the comings and goings of our days to help us keep work and play in proper proportion in *Spirituality & Everyday Life.* In *Pilgrimage,* Lenore Baeli Wang spends a month in New Mexico where the constant presence of whirring hummingbirds became an "emblem of a joyful creator's sense of humor."

So in the coming days be on the lookout for water birds and small winged things. Grace may take flight and alight near you.

Brother David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B.



Roland R. Ropers

Practicing Gratitude

David Steindl-Rast

Austrian-born Brother David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B., is a senior member of Mount Savior Benedictine monastery in New York state. After years of monastic training, Brother David was sent by his abbot to participate in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Together with Thomas Merton, Brother David contributed to the renewal of religious life, especially through the House of Prayer movement. Brother David is the author of A Listening Heart, Gratefulness, *and* Belonging to the Universe, *which he co-wrote with Fritjof Capra. At present, Brother David is concentrating his efforts on a truly wonderful interactive website, <gratefulness.org>. (Visit and light a candle.)*

Henry Stark, a frequent contributor to Sacred Journey, *recently interviewed Brother David about his most recent book,* Music of Silence: A Sacred Journey through the Hours of the Day, *co-written with Sharon Lebell.**

**In the monastic tradition every day unfolds during eight "hours" or public services of prayer and chanting. "Vigils," the early morning hour is when mystery and darkness reign. "Lauds" acknowledges the coming of the light. "Prime" is the time to deliberately take up the day's labors. "Terce" is a short mid-morning break where spiritual blessings provide the energy to reawaken. "Sext" is in the middle of everything when the sun is at its peak and life is often frenzied. This is the moment to think about peace and offer service to another. "None" acknowledges the lengthening shadows and fading of the day. "Vespers" celebrates the lighting of the lamps as darkness descends and the contradictions of the day are examined, reconciled, and replaced with serenity. "Compline" brings completion to the day. This final prayer for the day begins, "A peaceful night and a perfect end grant us." Thus, the circle of each day is drawn.*

Henry Stark for *Sacred Journey*: In *Music of Silence* you explain how the monastic hours allow you to "step out of mere clock time in which we simply react." How can people who are subjected to the hustle and bustle of everyday life live in harmony with the day's natural rhythms?

Brother David Steindl-Rast: You start with noticing the more obvious "seasons" or aspects of the day. Morning is a time of day that is different from noon time and different from evening. Gradually you might attune yourself to seeing that there is something special and recognizable about midmorning or midafternoon.

Everybody, not only monks, used to follow the day in former times. The monks especially attuned themselves to the sacred character of these different times of the day and night, but everyone experienced them. Before we had clocks and electric lights to make the night like day, we lived this way. But now everything is divided into clock time. Many people find it is good to come back to that natural rhythm of the day for their spiritual nourishment.

The last thing I do before I go to sleep at night is to lie in bed and think to myself: What service did I provide today? What were the good things I did today? This quiets me and motivates me because I know that is how I am measuring the success or failure of each day.

That's great. You can do the same in the morning. You can pause for a moment, even before you open your eyes, and ask: What service can I offer today? Somewhere during your lunch break take one minute and ask: How am I doing? These simple activities are already a part of living the day's rhythm. Living with intention comes quite naturally. It isn't exotic.

You write "Eternity is not a long, long time. Eternity is the opposite of time. It is no time." How can we free ourselves in a practical sense from chronological time to live in eternal time?

What mystics and spiritual writers of all the different traditions called eternity should not be misunderstood as a long, long time. That is a popular misconception. You may have heard the story of the little bird who comes to a gigantic mountain once every thousand years and scratches its beak and then flies away. When this bird has worn away the whole mountain by scratching just once every thousand years, then one second of eternity will have passed. This is an intriguing story but it doesn't really say anything about eternity. It just describes a long, long time. The whole point of eternity is that we as human beings reach out or stick out into a dimension that transcends time. Past and future are elements of time, but NOW, the present, is intangible and really exists outside of time.

Are we too obsessed with chronological time?

I myself am obsessed with being on time and not waiting too long in lines, but my point is not that we are obsessed, rather we are in danger of being prisoners of time. We cling to the past because we don't want to let go of it. We focus on the future and are not really present in the NOW. True happiness consists in being here. Yes, you treasure your past and look forward to your future, but mostly, you are focused on the NOW. This strangely liberates you from time.

It is hard to live in the NOW. I've noticed that the older one gets the more one is tempted to live in the past because it has spanned a longer time than the future will.

One of my former teachers at Cornell University who is in his 90s told me yesterday that he recently has discovered

meditation. He says when he is meditating he is completely living in the present. In meditation we can release that sense of time. In our peak moments, whenever we are really given to what we are doing, time seems to stand still.

All of those examples are about getting out of oneself. As soon as I get out of myself and into the moment, who cares about time?

And where do you "get to" when you get out of yourself? You get into your real self. Your real self is the self that is in communion with God and belongs with God.

I remember a Zen teacher of mine who said "'just' is the best word in the English language. Just do whatever you are doing and you have made it." In our best moments I think all of us experience this. We have to remind ourselves: What was that moment when time stood still? I lost myself and I found myself.

When work is distributed to the monks during *Prime*, you write that we "savor our work as we are doing it . . . . We need to resist our tendency to rush into things and to hurry through our activities." What advice would you give a production line worker about making work meaningful?

First we have to set this into context. There are kinds of work that are not humane. Piece work on the conveyor belt is not humane and should not exist. We should find other ways of dealing with those tasks. But I'd say this to the line worker: "This work you do to earn a living has to be complemented with work where you see the process of what you do from beginning to end, even if it is gardening, or making a kite for your kid, or knitting a sweater for your grandchild, or whittling for your own enjoyment."

Try to put something into your professional work that will redeem it as best you can. In a famous Japanese film, a young woman shows this older man a mechanical bunny rabbit that jumps across the table. She tells him that she makes these rabbits for a living. She says that while she works she thinks of all the little babies who will use and enjoy these bunny rabbits.

Someone who works on an assembly line could bless every piece or product as it is handled. Blessing is a very concrete reality. The word "blessing" is related in English to the word "blood." Blessing is like the spiritual bloodstream that flows through the universe. When we bless something we are returning what we have received to its source. We know we receive life and breath from a source which is beyond us. We haven't bought it or earned it. We are just put here and life comes to us from some mysterious source, and we can give it back. That is like the blood coming from the heart and going back to the heart. That blood keeps on flowing and if we tune in to the bloodstream of blessing the world comes alive. The same thing happens if we cut off the bloodstream or drain the sap from a tree; life withers.

Do you believe that we all get blessings from God even if we are unaware of them?

The gifts or blessings of life are always there but if we are not aware of them, they don't do much for us. That is where gratefulness comes in. Gratefulness makes us aware of the gift and makes us happy. As long as we take things for granted they don't make us happy. Gratefulness is the key to happiness. Practicing gratitude is so central to my spirituality. That's why I am now working on a website that is called <gratefulness.org>. It is an interactive website that helps people to discover and cultivate gratefulness and use

gratefulness to change society. There are a thousand ways to do that. We even have a new feature of lighting a candle in cyberspace. This is not a gimmick, but it is a 21st century ritual. You click on the candlewick to light it and it will burn for twenty-four hours and get smaller as it burns. You can send a message to someone telling them you lit a candle for them. This provides a gratefulness ritual you can do right where you are, and we are very poor on ritual in our time. Rituals are very important to human beings; they keep us alive.

How do rituals keep us alive?

Rituals make us mindful. Every ritual—graduations, funerals, weddings—has something to do with gratefulness. The Mass or Eucharist in the Catholic tradition literally means "thanksgiving." In the Hindu tradition a *puja,* or sacrifice, is a grateful acknowledgement of a gift. Offering the first fruits of the harvest is a ritual. You lift up a part of what you have received to the source from which you received it. This is an expression of gratefulness.

How do we build prayer breaks into our days? You write about creating a "portable monastery" that goes with you during your frequent travels.

I have some prayer beads that I move and they keep me mindful. Buddhists and many other traditions have beads, too. Whatever mantra or prayer you use while moving them becomes almost automatic or habitual in a positive way. Having a little card or picture that you look up at often can serve the same purpose. Many people do this by putting pictures on their desk of their sweetheart or children. These things remind us of what and who matter.

You write, "Prayer is not sending in an order and expecting it to be fulfilled. Prayer is attuning yourself to the life of the world, to love, to the force that moves the sun and the moon and the stars." When things are going well in my life I can relate to those words. But how can I understand this when I face a devastating medical diagnosis or am in the depths of depression?

The moment when you get bad news or are in a depression is not the moment to start attuning yourself in prayer. If you practice attuning yourself now, it will be relatively easy even in those very difficult times. If you live gratefully recognizing the good when you have a cup of tea or a comfortable seat or a nice conversation, then when something difficult comes along, this will not be the first moment when you wake up. Ninety-nine percent of the time we have an opportunity to be grateful for something. We just don't notice it. We go through our days in a daze.

I once had jaw surgery for a tumor and while no one wants to have surgery, that experience turned me on to all sorts of sensations and awareness.

At the time you wouldn't have thought a tumor was something to be grateful for and it isn't. The thing to be grateful for is the opportunity to learn something new. I suffer a great deal with depression, so I know how it feels not to be able to be grateful for depression. You hardly can do anything, but if you are in spiritual training you can at least think, well, this is an opportunity to learn patience. You trust that this, too, will pass.

So it is better to start and get into the habit of gratefulness in the good times?

It is not only better, it is absolutely necessary. There is no other time to start. You will find that even your worst times are creative times. And creativity and aliveness are what we are after.

During the monastic hour called *None*, the last part of the day, you write that you pray daily for a holy and peaceful death. But if you pray for a peaceful death how do you reconcile that with your earlier comment that prayer is not sending in orders to be fulfilled?

"Give us this day our daily bread," is the most typical prayer because so many people pray it everyday. Does that mean that if we don't ask for something God won't give it to us? It would be wrong to pray for a good death like putting in an order. That would be a wrong concept. Rather, when we pray that way, we are really attuning ourselves to God's blessing and provision. We can trust in the blessings that continually flow and attune ourselves to be grateful for them.

There are stages of faith and stages of religious experience. I would say that this praying, as putting in an order and making a bargain, is simply a stage we go through. We maintain certain expressions from this stage but we come to understand them differently.

When you pray for a holy death, are you praying that there will not be a prolonged illness?

I would hope and trust that were so, but I also pray that if there is a prolonged illness, I will be able to cope with whatever comes. It is not under our control.

I think if I live a spiritual life then I will be prepared for whatever is coming.

That is the point. If we train ourselves to be in the present

moment and to be with the present moment gratefully, when any other moment comes, even the moment of death, you will be in that attitude and that would be a good death.

You currently live away from your monastery. What challenges does that create for you?

I have traveled so much for decades doing so much outreach that I have had relatively little time to go inward. My abbot thought this was a good opportunity for me to be in a hermitage. I do feel some separation from my community but feel that being interiorly connected to them is sometimes easier than when you have to rub against them every day. So it has its advantages and disadvantages. But I am grateful, too, for the opportunity to make the best of it. Working on this website, which I can do from the hermitage, offers a strange combination of living in seclusion and being in touch with thousands of people.

Is there a final thought that you would like to share with the readers of *Sacred Journey*?

Sacred Journey suggests being on a way. If I should name the particular road which we are on, it would be the road of gratefulness. It is at the heart of every religious tradition and the human path of those who do not identify with any religious path. Gratefulness is the core of spirituality.

Plan Now to Join Us In Princeton for the Second

COMPANIONS ON THE SACRED JOURNEY

Conference June 14, 15, and 16, 2002

Keynote speakers will be:

Dr. Gerald (Jerry) May,
spiritual director, psychiatrist and widely-read author of *Addiction and Grace, Care of Mind/Care of Spirit,* and *The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love You Need*

and

Joan Borysenko,
a leading authority on women's spirituality and author of best-selling books, *A Woman's Book of Life, Minding the Body/Mending the Mind, A Woman's Journey to God,* and *Seven Paths to God: The Ways of the Mystic*

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To be added to the list, e-mail us at **heck@sacredjourney.org.** or write to us at 291 Witherspoon Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08542-3227.

The Life of the Heart

Gerald May

Love is the life of our heart. According to it, we desire, rejoice, hope and despair, fear, take heart, hate, avoid things, feel sad, grow angry, and exult. *~Francis De Sales*

Love is the most important quality of human life, and the least comprehensible. I am a little embarrassed to think how much time and energy I have spent trying to understand love. Perhaps I believed my concepts and definitions of life would help me "do" it better or make it more safe. No such luck; I do not think we can adequately define or understand love; I do not think we were ever meant to. . . . We are meant to participate in love without really comprehending it. . . .

Gerald G. May will be a keynote speaker at the "Companions on the Sacred Journey" conference June 14-16, 2002, in Princeton. Jerry is the author of Addiction and Grace, Care of Mind/Care of Spirit *and* Will and Spirit. *He is also Senior Fellow in Contemplative Theology and Psychology at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation in Washington, D.C. This excerpt is from* The Awakened Heart: Opening Yourself to the Love You Need *by Gerald G. May, M.D.* *©1991 by Gerald G . May. Published by Harper Collins Publishers. Used by permission.*

Your Love Story

Instead of trying to know what love is by abstract concepts and definitions, I suggest you seek a more direct appreciation of your own experiences of love. You might think of it as telling your story of love. Begin with a few broad brush strokes about what love has been for you in your life so far. Recall some experiences of love for people, places, possessions. What did those experiences of love feel like? How did they affect you? What is your experience of love right now? How do you sense yourself loving, being loved, being in love? And what are your desires for love, your hopes, dreams, and fantasies?

Love appears with endless variety: kindness, attraction, commitment, sexuality, intimacy, concern, simple appreciation, on and on. There are good feelings like tenderness, connectedness, and warmth. And there are unpleasant feelings like grief, loneliness, and fear. See if you can appreciate the full range of feelings that accompany love for you, your sense of the depth and breadth of love. Then, very quietly, ask what all these feelings might have in common. What is it that makes you call it love? What is the basic quality of loving someone or something? What is it to be loved?

Now see if you can recall an experience of just being in love, when love became radically free for you. One person experienced it while watching a sunset: "I just sat there, absorbed by the beauty. It was not simply a sunset; it was everything and everyone. It felt as though I had fallen in love with everything." Another person related it to romance: "Sometimes when I was with him, things would just open up. I don't know how else to say it. I felt I was in love with the whole world, and it loved me." Still another talked about worship: "There are times when the

routine and ritual fall away and I'm just there, and everyone is there, and the whole world is there, all one in love." Yet another spoke of childhood: "I can't quite remember, but I know the feeling. Maybe I'd be playing in the sun, or lying on my bed, and just feel so warm, as if I were being held." Some people cannot actually recall such experiences, but instead sense a kind of background knowledge, an awareness that something like this does exist somewhere, and always has. Whatever your experience, try to be honest with it and appreciate it as fully as you can.

Action, Knowing, and Feeling

If you find it difficult to identify with the examples I have given, it may be that you associate love more with action or knowledge than with feelings. Classic Eastern and Western spiritual traditions identify three ways of approaching life: the way of action, the way of knowing, and the way of feeling. It is assumed that a full life involves all three, but at any given time a person tends to prefer one. It is not important to do psychological gymnastics to figure out which orientation you might have. It is critical, however, to recognize that neither love or anything else of consequence can rightfully be reduced to one narrow vision. Love is feeling—tenderness, caring, and longing—but it is also much more. Love is action—kindness, charity, and commitment—and again, it is much more. Love is knowing—openness of attitude, realization of connectedness, expansion of attention beyond ourselves—and still it is more.

Reflect once again on your experiences of love from the standpoints of action and knowing as well as feeling. What are some of the activities, the doings,

of love for you? What are the knowings, the attitudes and realizations, the wisdom of love? Don't try to pull these insights into any final answer; just let them embellish your story.

Love is always more than our actions can do, more than our knowings can understand, and more than our feelings can bear. Doing loving acts, however helpful, is not enough. Feeling loving thoughts, however charitable, is not enough. Feeling loving feelings, however tender, is not enough. Put them all together and love still wants more. Give us time, and we will want more love. Give love time, and it will want more of us.

Contemplation: The Fourth Way

In both Eastern and Western spirituality, there is a fourth way, an appreciation that embraces action, feeling, and knowing and also seeks the "more" that love always is. In Hinduism it is known as the Royal Way; in Tibetan Buddhism it is the Way of Total Completeness. In the West, it is called the contemplative way.

Contrary to popular understanding, contemplation does not imply quietness or withdrawal. Instead, it is a quality of immediate, open presence that is directly involved with life-as-it-is. Recall some of the moments in your life when you have felt most alive, most awake, most completely present and involved with what is going on. Some may be the same times you identified as just being in love. Others may be surprises. People often experience flashes of contemplation in prayer and meditation, but it can happen anywhere. One person described "perfect presence" when there was a fire in her house and she acted immediately to take care of her family and call for help. "I never felt so alive," she said, "and until after it

was all over, there was no fear—none at all." Another woman described the same thing during childbirth. A man told of contemplative presence that happened spontaneously while he was waiting in an airport for a delayed flight. "Normally I would have been restless, but for some reason, in some strange way, I was just there, with all the people in their joys of reunion and griefs of separation, with the real lives of the airline personnel, even with the trucks and trees outside the windows, and the person making announcements on the public address system. God, if only I could live all my days like that!"

Contemplative moments can happen in crisis, excitement, and great activity, or in quiet stillness and simple appreciation. However it happens, contemplation immerses us in the reality of the moment. We are no longer standing apart and reflecting upon our experience. We are vitally, consciously involved with what is going on. Everything is more clear, more real than it usually is.

I do not know how well I have described contemplation; your own remembrance is better than my words. Go over your experience again. What is the difference between the way you are most of the time and the way you have been in those special moments of immediate presence? Why is it that the moments seem to come so rarely? Where are you the rest of the time?

For now, let us say contemplation is a conscious willingness to fully enter into life just as it is. Manjusrimitra, an ancient saint of Tibetan Buddhism, called it "pure and total presence." Thomas Kelly, a twentieth-century American Quaker, called it, "continually renewed immediacy." The contemplative way recognizes that love or any other aspect of life cannot be fully appreciated through acting, knowing, feeling, or

any combination of the three. It admits that human experience can never stand apart and completely comprehend the truth. It celebrates the always-present, ungraspable mystery in life.

The contemplative way acknowledges that we begin to appreciate love's fullness only as we enter it immediately, directly, and with undefended awareness. This happens very simply, not by any thought or strategy, but by being present in love: being appreciatively and responsively right here and now. It happens as we realize our aliveness in the present moment. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, a modern master of the spiritual life, described contemplation "not as a dim configuration that is presented to you from the distance, but as the reality in which you live." The twelfth-century Islamic saint Ibn al-'Arabi said that "when the Heart embraces the Reality, it is as if Reality fills the Heart."

I am proposing that contemplative appreciation is the fullest possible realization of love. The contemplative moments that come to us all as flashes of immediate presence are glimpses of the way life yearns to be lived. They are hints of the vast, graceful gift of love that has already been given to the family of humanity. The contemplative heart says, "Only open your hands, receive the gift." This does not mean we can control contemplation or that we can be contemplative at will. It is a gift we can accept only as it is given. But it is given far more frequently, far more steadily than we could ever imagine.

Petition

Nancy Neiman-Hoffman

O Spirit Great whose voice I hear in wind,
in roiling surf, uncertain fledgling's peep,
show me, lost and grieving, where to find

necessity to once again begin,
at night to pray the Lord my soul to keep,
O Spirit Great whose voice I hear in wind.

Since falling sparrows are within your ken,
then see you, too, this errant, straying sheep?
Show me, lost and grieving, how to find

the lambent morning's ordinary shine,
the revelation to the small and weak,
O Spirit Great, whose voice I hear in wind.

Release your child from cynicism's sin.
Forgive my slackness. Bring me to faith's leap.
Teach me, lost and grieving, to unbind

the hearts held hostage to the grasping mind.
Be near me when I lay me down to sleep,
O Spirit Great whose voice I hear in wind.
Find me, lost and grieving, Who are kind.

Nancy Neiman-Hoffman is a Jungian analyst from Connecticut. Donna Schaper's prayer was previously published in Celebrate Labor Day *by Liguori Publications and is used by permission of the author. Bruce Hassett is a husband, father of three, grandfather of four, and a retired Manhattan fire chief.*

In Thanksgiving for My Own Work

Donna Schaper

Bring me out of the house of bondage today,
O God, into the house of freedom.
Hear my thanks for the work of my hands,
and heart and mind.
Release me from the guilt I carry at not
doing enough and never being done. Bring me into the grace of
completion in incompleteness.
Sabbath me, from time to time, even on the job.
In the name of the true God.
Amen.

My Prayer

Bruce Hassett

My Father, you are in me and all around me,
Holy are we.
It pleases you to give me the kingdom.
May I, through your grace,
Participate in its unfolding.
Sustain me with the gifts of
Wisdom, courage and purity of heart.
Keep me safe.
May I forgive others as you have forgiven me.
And may my weaknesses and failures be united to your poverty,
For within your poverty, humility and mercy
is the kingdom the power and the glory.
Amen.

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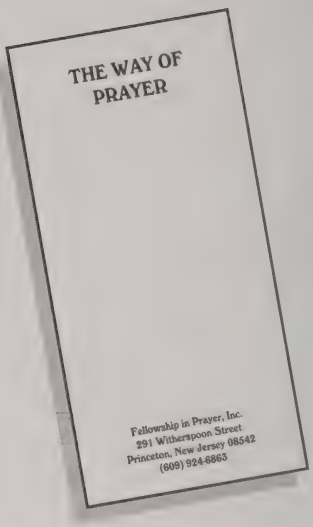

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Paper Prayers

Richard Bauman

Praying and distraction are practically synonymous for me. Often, after only a moment or two of prayer, sometimes after just a few seconds, distracting thoughts fill my mind. At other times I can't seem to put into words or thoughts what I want to say to God. At these and other times, I resort to "paper prayers."

Prayers don't have to be spoken aloud or voiced in our thoughts for God to hear them. Using paper and pen, or even computer and keyboard, can bring deeper meaning and enrichment to one's prayer life.

In his book, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home,* Richard Foster writes, "When you are unable to put your spiritual life into drive, don't put it into reverse; put it into neutral." For some of us, the way to put our spiritual life back into drive is through "paper prayers."

Writing prayers does more than quiet distractions. It helps us "talk" more purposefully and more directly to God. We can release more thoroughly what is in our hearts and commit it to our Creator. As thoughts and feelings flow on to paper, the action of writing actually generates

This article is an excerpt from the recently published book, Awe-full Moments: Spirituality in the Commonplace, *by Richard Bauman. He is a freelance writer from West Covina, CA and specializes in writing articles on spirituality. His book is available on-line and through major bookstores.*

additional reflections to be expressed. "Writing has the dynamic character of a movement into the unknown," notes Joseph Schmidt in his book, *Praying Your Experiences.* "We can never be sure of what the writing might yield. When we take pen in hand we grasp a door handle and begin to open areas of. . . awareness that are deeper than we had imagined."

Since praying is communicating with God, that presupposes dialogue rather than a monologue.

"We need to be reminded that prayer involves listening perhaps more than speaking," writes Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book, *Who Needs God?* "It involves opening ourselves to what God wants us to hear, in a setting purified of the noise and distractions of the every day world."

Praying on paper makes it easier for God to reach our hearts and minds. "As our conversation continues we are startled by the truths that unfold," notes Schmidt, in describing writing our prayers. "Significance and awareness reach a clarity that we had not realized consciously before."

"In prayer we discover what we already have," said Thomas Merton. In writing our prayers, our hearts open and give God time to show us "what we already have." We see more clearly our concerns, pain and desires—and God's response to them.

Prayer writing requires us to dedicate time to sitting down with paper and pen, and opening our hearts to God.

Where can you find such time? Perhaps you can:

- Get up fifteen minutes earlier every morning
- Give up some TV time
- Find a quiet place at lunchtime to write to God
- Stay up fifteen minutes later each night

People who love each other find time to be together. If we show up, ready and willing to write, God will show up too, ready to listen and respond to our prayers.

By consistently writing prayers we gain insight into our real selves. "We write more than we are fully conscious of . . . . Under our pen emerge reflections and insights. . . which we had not articulated before," notes Schmidt.

In the twelve-month span from October 1994 to October 1995, there were four deaths in our family, two within a month of each other. Much of my grieving for my older sister, my mother-in-law, my wife's sister, and her husband, was done through prayer writing.

One prayer journal entry shows me how I thought in grief I had to be "tough" for the benefit of others. "Part of me says, 'You shouldn't feel so bad, it was only a sister who died. It wasn't like it was a spouse or a child of your own who died.' I just talked to Teri (a friend), and realized how much I want to minimize my feelings, my pain.

Dear God, I want to be so profound and say such grand things, and all I can say honestly is, I hurt, God. And I don't think it should hurt so much, but it does."

As we fill journals with our prayers, we gain self-knowledge and learn about God's relationship with us. Our prayers on paper become a part of our spiritual autobiography.

Prayers often have more meaning when we write them rather than simply speaking them. For instance, prayers of gratitude, or "gratitude lists" are powerful and meaningful prayers when written.

"Gratitude doesn't come naturally to most people," notes Rabbi Kushner. Thus, prayer shouldn't be just an inventory of what we lack, "But a series of reminders of what we have, and what we might so easily take for granted, and forget to be thankful for."

Gratitude lists can express thankfulness for all manner of things. For instance, we can thank God for:

- The fact we are alive
- Our homes, jobs, and other material blessings
- The beauty around us, a glorious sunrise, pretty flowers
- The blessings of good health for family and ourselves
- Our friends and family
- Being delivered from our fears

Writing gratitude prayers increases our joy and keeps us sensitive to the good that fills our lives.

Of all the prayers I've written the past few years, perhaps the most spiritually enriching have been prayers of forgiveness. Especially prayers of forgiveness for my father.

For decades I grasped tightly to resentment and anger toward my father; some of it righteous, so much of it exaggerated. But he has been dead since 1987, and I realized that to grow spiritually I had to forgive him.

Not knowing how to do it, I wrote prayers simply asking God for the grace to forgive, and to show me how to do it. And he did. I was led to write a "Litany of Forgiveness" for my father. That, however, wasn't enough. God further showed me that I needed to thank my father, too, for the good influences he had been responsible for in my life. I felt God saying to me, "Richard, you need to forgive your father, and you must bless him, too."

My "Litany of Forgiveness" and my "Litany of Blessings" were written over several days. Here are just a few of the prayers in that "Litany of Forgiveness:"

- For the times you drove drunk with my mother and sister in the car—I forgive you my father.

- For the times you were physically and verbally abusive to me—I forgive you my father.
- For the times you belittled me in front of others—I forgive you my father. And so on.

The "Litany of Blessings" also had numerous prayers including:

- For always providing a home, clothes, food to eat and a bed of my own when I was growing up—I bless you my father.
- For my parochial school education—I bless you my father.
- For teaching me how to use tools and work on cars—I bless you my father.

A special advantage to writing our prayers is that we can literally keep up with what we say to God and reread it at will. We can share our prayers with others when appropriate. My litanies were read to a trusted friend who I knew would understand not only what I was doing but its significance, too.

What was the result of my litanies? A sense of releasing my father, letting him go, and releasing, too, the anger and contempt I had held tight and close for so many years.

"Something miraculous happens when people come. . . seeking the presence of God," says Rabbi Kushner. "The miracle is we often find it." And writing prayers can help us more quickly enjoy that miracle.

Our prayer life is usually enriched through prayer writing. Our knowledge of God's part in our lives, God's will for us, and self-knowledge grow deeper, too. These things happen, ultimately, because writing our prayers brings us to strong, intimate contact with two special persons—God and ourselves.

ILLUMINATIONS

If you love truth be a lover of silence. Silence like the sunlight will illuminate you in God and will deliver you from the phantoms of ignorance. Silence will unite you to God.

~Isaac of Nineveh

In love, the gates of my soul spring open, allowing me to breathe a new air of freedom and forget my own petty self. In love, my whole being streams forth out of the rigid confines of narrowness and self-assertion which makes me a prisoner of my own poverty and emptiness.

~Karl Rahner

I was regretting the past and fearing the future. Suddenly my Lord was speaking. "My name is I AM," he paused. I waited. He continued, "When you live in the past, with its mistakes and regrets, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not I WAS. When you live in the future with its problems and fears, it is hard. I am not there. My name is not I WILL BE. When you live in this moment, it is not hard. I am here. My name is I AM."

~Helen Mallicoat

These selections are taken from Contemplative Gleanings, *a quarterly, one-page quotation collection compiled by Carolyn Humphreys. To subscribe send your address to* Contemplative Gleanings, *c/o C. Humphreys,* OCD, *7101 E. Rosecrans Ave. #159, Paramount, CA. 90723-2524. Donations or stamps sent to defray the costs of this free mailing are appreciated.*

Let nothing disturb you. Let nothing frighten you. For all things pass save God who does not change. Be patient and at the last you will find all fulfillment. Hold God and nothing will fail you. For God alone is all.

~Teresa of Avila

God's might to direct me, God's power to protect me, God's wisdom for learning, God's eye for discerning, God's ear for my hearing, God's word for my clearing.

~Early Gaelic Hymn

Lord Jesus Christ, you are for me medicine for when I am sick; you are my strength when I need help; you are life itself when I fear death; you are the way when I long for heaven; you are light when all is dark; you are my food when I need nourishment.

~Ambrose

O my God, fill my soul with holy joy, courage and strength to serve you. Enkindle your love in me and then walk with me along the next stretch of road before me. I do not see very far ahead, but when I have arrived where the horizon now closes down, a new prospect will open before me and I shall meet it with peace.

~Edith Stein

May he support us all the day long, 'til the shades lengthen, and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over, and our work is done. Then in his mercy may he give us a safe lodging and a holy rest, and peace at the last.

~John Henry Newman

Finding Firmer Footing

Carolyn Whitmore Shilling

When faced with an unwanted challenge, my first reaction is to feel as though I am walking on a tightrope. I am filled with panic about what to do and fear that it will be difficult, whatever I do. This was my reaction when I was again diagnosed for cancer seventeen years after my first bout. This time, the cancer was different which made my prospects seem even more bleak.

Looking back, I do realize that one does handle unwanted challenges somehow. After the surgery which my doctor felt was essential but before further treatment, I began to explore and gather more information. I called the American Cancer Society and the National Institute of Health, talked with a second oncologist, and sought to secure medical studies and statistics on the Internet. Also, I made many phone calls concerning the use of non-traditional ways of healing. The sheer volume of information was mind boggling. But I was beginning to take steps forward and was no longer paralyzed with fear.

Carol Shilling facilitates a monthly ecumenical healing service and coordinates the telephone prayer chain for her church in Kingston, Rhode Island.

For me, this second stage was like walking on a porch railing as I had as a child. I was choosing whom I would call and what I would read. It was a challenge to sense what was firm fact and what was opinion. My situation was still undesirable, but my footing was feeling more secure. I felt more like a person and less a victim.

Then came a difficult stage of deciding a course of action. I continued to read and talk with others who had varied opinions. I journaled, prayed for guidance, asked for others' prayers and read a helpful book, *Paths to Healing*, about some who had chosen the traditional medical path, others who combined traditional and nontraditional ways of healing and some who chose only the nontraditional path. I saw that there were aspects common to all the different paths that seemed to further healing. Those interested me particularly, for I knew that I wanted to choose life and do whatever would further my healing.

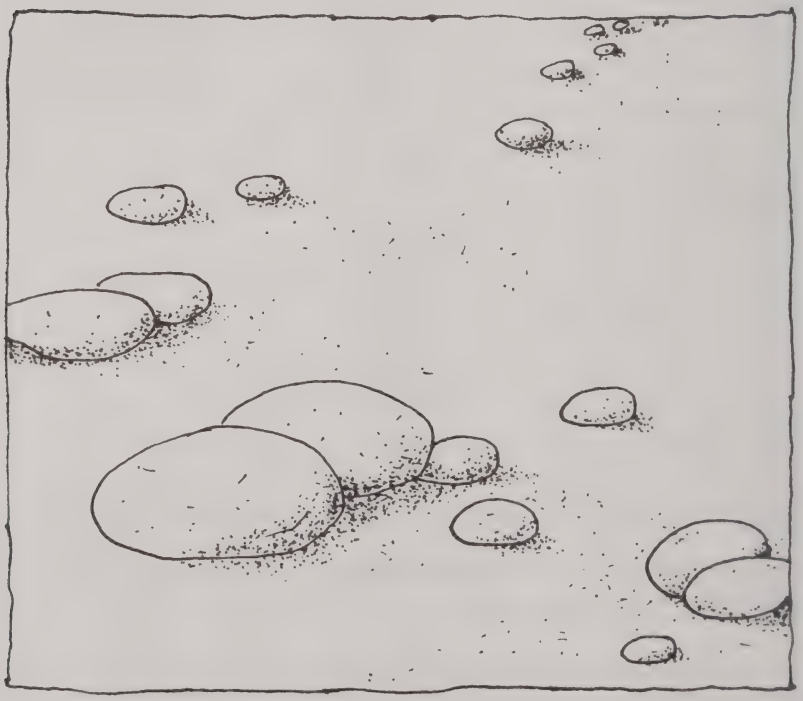
I listed the pros and cons of the different options. Soon I was amazed to find that there was a middle ground of constants whatever I decided. This firmer footing provided a stone bridge for me to cross over. Each "stone" was a truth that would hold me up:

- There will be risks no matter what, but God is constant.
- Death is a certainty at some time.
- I choose to live as fully as possible.
- My immune system needs strengthening in any case.
- I alone must choose my best option, my attitudes, and my behavior.
- Opportunities to grow will come.

- God will provide loving presence and empowering.
- Hope and trust in God will be needed.
- My way and decisions are only for me.
- God's hand of love has many fingers: scripture, songs, loving persons, prayer, healing services, medical help, God-incidences, communal support, dreams, helpful books.

These "stones" became the stone bridge that I now walk upon. Life is fragile and what lies ahead is unknown. However, I felt more stable having this new firmer footing.

Could it be, that when I face other challenges and changes in my life, I'll again have to find firmer footing?



Lucy Graves McVicker

Celebrate Ramadan

Ivan G. Nassar

In 2001, Muslims worldwide will observe Ramadan from November 17th to December 17th. Last year the dates for the month-long fast overlapped with holiday seasons celebrated by Christians and Jews. To experience the fast of Ramadan in urban America where the national culture is Christianity was a real test of faith for my fellow Muslims and myself. The fast of Ramadan occurred amid the frenzy of the Christmas season. Traditional social gatherings in the workplace, and gatherings among friends received a polite 'no' response if they jeopardized the obligations of the fast. The Muslim's holy book, the Qur'an, teaches us that we are not to strain relationships with family members who do not share our beliefs.

The Islamic calendar begins with the year 1 AH, the time of the Prophet's flight to the city of Medina, escaping persecution from the hands of the enemies of Islam. This date is known as the year of the *Hijrah*; the corresponding date to the Gregorian calendar is July 16, 622 AD. The small group of Muslims who migrated with the Prophet to Medina began the spread of Islam that is now practiced throughout the Muslim world.

Ivan G. Nassar is a writer from Cleveland, Ohio

The Islamic calendar has three hundred and fifty-four days and twelve lunar months of alternating twenty-nine and thirty days. Each month of the calendar passes once through all the seasons in a cycle of thirty years. The month of Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar when the prophet of Islam received the first revelation of the Qur'an. He continued to receive revelations over a period of twenty-three years. Because of the calendar's rotating cycle, Ramadan may occur in the bitter cold of winter or the smothering heat of summer. Muslims in the Far East may experience Ramadan in the midst of their monsoon season. The Qur'an, which all Muslims adhere to as the word of God, says, "Every one of you who are present at his home during that month should spend it in fasting." No matter what the philosophical or ideological discrepancies found in the interpretation of the teaching of Islam, there is no compromise on the Five Pillars of the faith. The observance of the fast of Ramadan is one of the pillars of the faith.

The Rules of the Fast

From dawn until the setting of the sun, food and drink and sexual intercourse with one's spouse are forbidden. 'Permitted to you on the night of the fasts, is the approach to your wives. They are your garments and ye are their garments.' (Holy Qur'an 2:187). At sunset my wife and I break the fast with fleshy fruit, preferably fresh dates and water as was the practice of the prophet. Before we partake of the full meal, we make ablution to perform the obligated sunset prayer, as prayer is the second pillar of faith, preempted only by the belief in the one God (Allah). We wash our hands three times, starting with the right hand. Next we wash our mouths three times, our noses

from the inside, then our faces, three times. We wash the arms up to the elbows three times, and then pass our wet hands over our heads, backs of the neck, and behind the ears. The last washing is the feet, also done three times. Ablution is a form of purifying the body and heart before we appear before our Lord in prayer. 'And eat and drink, until the white threads of dawn appear to you distinct from its black thread; then complete your fast till the night appears.' (Holy Qur'an 2:187).

The obligation of the worshipers during the time of fasting is the practice of self-restraint. The prophet has reported, 'All the deeds of Adam's sons are for them, except fasting which is for me (Allah).' We spend most of the days of our lives seeking to satisfy ourselves and to please others. Islam teaches that the fast of Ramadan is only for the pleasure of Allah. The prophet has also stated, 'The worst thing that a man can fill is his stomach.' Fasting teaches Muslims to value the good things Allah has provided for them in life. Fasting also recalls the anguish of the poor and hungry.

When a day of fasting has ended, it is customary for the believers to gather at their respective places of worship and listen to the recitation of the Qur'an while performing the prescribed prayers known as *Taraweeh*. Before a believer leaves a prayer service, he or she prays for the acceptance of their day of fasting and forgiveness of their sins.

Who are Exempt

Exempt from the fast are children who have not reached the age of puberty, the elderly, the ill person who would not be able to endure the physical adversity of the fast, and the traveler. Pregnant women and those with nursing infants, women during the time of their

menstruation period and those confined after childbirth are also exempt. All days missed during the fast may be rescheduled as indicated from the statement of the Qur'an, "And whoever is sick or on a journey, he shall fast a like number of other days. Allah desires ease for you, and that you should complete that number."

Fasting teaches us to withhold ourselves from things that are offensive to God. A person surrounded by food during Ramadan will not take it because he believes in an all-seeing God and his spiritual strength will prevail over that which is unlawful. On a hot summer day during Ramadan where there is water to drink, the Muslim will not drink it. Would such a person be induced to drink that which is unlawful at any other time? A young married couple who is at home alone will not engage in sex during the fast hours. They have prepared themselves spiritually to triumph over the sins of the flesh in times of temptation. Fasting recharges our spiritual batteries so that we can get more productive mileage from the vehicle God has loaned us for our life's journey.

The prophet of Islam has reported, 'If my community would realize what Ramadan really is, they would wish that the whole year would be just Ramadan.'

Connecting Prayer to Work

Donna Schaper

We go to work every day and we come home from work every day. Many of us work from "9-5" in some form or another. Prayer is a very useful gatekeeper in entering and exiting. Invocations and benedictions, just as we have in formal worship, help a lot of us know where our work day stops and our play day starts, and vice versa. Such prayers sabbath us. They keep the holy and the unholy in their proper place and proportion to each other.

It's not that our work is not holy or that our play necessarily is—rather our days nest in levels and layers of holiness. We remember what is holy about our work by pausing to remember; we remember what is holy about our play by pausing to remember.

Keeping separations keeps proportion. All things are not the same; days are not homogenized. Time is separated into parts, and thus proportioned. We "right-size" our time at work and we "right-size" our time at play. We remember

Donna E. Schaper is a United Church of Christ minister in Florida and author of many books including Sabbath Keeping *and* Raising Interfaith Children: Spiritual Orphans or Spiritual Heirs.

just how small—and wonderful—our little days are in the grand scheme and time of God.

What connection has prayer to work? They often seem like strangers from opposite realms. One wears tough leather boots and plods heavily, lifting, wheezing, managing, composing. The other dances with ballet-slipper grace, lightening all loads. Prayer is more like air; work is more like earth. Sabbath prayers connect earth and sky, plodding and dancing, tough and soft.

Prayer and work are both connections to God. Each is, at its best, simple acknowledgment that nothing is separate from God. Prayer, like healthy spirituality, is the simplicity that all things bow at one throne, the throne of grace, the place where Jesus lives, deep at the heart of things, at the bottom of the bottom of layers.

Spirituality is the knowledge of one world with God at the holy center. We are found at the spokes. Our prayer is a spoke, and our work is a spoke. Rather than being opposites, they turn in the same direction.

How can we pray our way in and pray our way out of work? We can mark the borders with a bow to God. Perhaps our prayers will have words. Perhaps they will simply be bows and nods.

I live in hotels more than I ever thought I would. I have even come to like them in that they are sparse and clean and simple. Whenever I go into a hotel room, I nest, by putting my things away, rather compulsively, in a similar pattern. Then, when my things are settled, I say, "Hello, little house." When I leave, I say, "Goodbye, little house." Do I feel silly doing and saying these things? Yes, a little bit. But I add a thanks to God, who gives me shelter, both at home and away. I give thanks to God who keeps me safer than the security lock on any of my many doors ever could.

I guard my going out and my coming in. Hotels are a part of work for me, as they are for many people. We travelers often have rituals to mark our take-offs and landings as well.

In learning that I needed these markers for my border crossings, I learned that I also need them at home. I need to nod to God when I leave my driveway, again to give thanks for the road and my journey on it. When I return to my driveway, I again nod to God and give thanks for the return from my journey. These little rituals give a proportion to my life. They tell me that it is not all the same. My life is made up of variety and difference and nuance. These nods to God tell me that my whole life is holy and that holiness comes to me in different ways. These nods acknowledge the sabbath and bring rest to me. They bring the right size to me and my days.

Synchronicity in the Desert

Lenore Baeli Wang

After two and a half years of work on a novel, I was ready for a break. I set my sites on New Mexico, my favorite vacation spot. When I learned that classes in the arts, theology, archaeology, and many other subjects were offered at Ghost Ranch, near Abiquiu, I knew I had stumbled upon what I needed. As a teacher, taking classes myself provides great refreshment. Another attraction was that the ranch claimed to be ecumenically oriented. I signed up for a month's worth of courses.

Ghost Ranch used to be called *El Rancho de los Brujos* (Ranch of the Witches) because of murders and hangings that occurred in its early days before the Presbyterians were given the land. A winged cow was said to fly over the place at dusk, and if you saw it, you would die! Ghost Ranch's history is a classic example of the way in which the dead and desiccated flow with living waters at the touch of the Spirit. Few who have spent time at the place would hesitate to call it Holy Ghost Ranch.

While I am very much drawn to the words and life of Jesus, I am not at all comfortable calling myself a Christian, so I don't. Many of the people I found in my classes called

Lenore Baeli Wang writes poetry, plays, and fiction. She teaches writing at Rider University in Lawrenceville, New Jersey.

themselves Christians. Many, in fact, were Christian ministers. A range of denominations was present, as was a unified ecumenical spirit. One of my first eye-openers in my first two weeks, almost embarrassing to admit, was the discovery that for most of my life, I'd equated Christianity with fundamentalism, and all the connotations of narrow-mindedness I'd come to associate with it.

My third week and third course at Ghost Ranch addressed, both in content and experience, just this issue. The teacher, in her great knowledge and respect for original sources, proceeded to demonstrate the compassionate humanism of John Calvin, and how we, as a culture originating in religious humanism, have strayed from our humanity-respecting democratic beginnings. Calvin advocated separation of church and state because he respected that of God in human beings. Creatures who carry God in their hearts do not need to be overseen by a big brother state. Calvin respected this light-within aspect of humanity so much that his tolerance far exceeds what we've come to associate with Calvinism in these days of political fundamentalism.

It was even through Calvin's aegis that the Qur'an was published. "We shall neither reject the truth, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God," he says, in a spirit of true ecumenism.

In the course of this one-week seminar, my spiritual vision expanded like the shutter of a camera that had been frozen at a particular diameter that had been suddenly opened.

A constant reminder of these surprising and beautiful visions of the spirit, was the unpredictable presence of the hummingbird at Ghost Ranch. Whether I was sitting in the quiet meditation garden behind Ghost House, or passing by the stunning flower bed of cosmos blossoms in

front of the office, a strange, tiny whir would alert me to its presence—brief moments of incandescent beauty and amazement—before off it would whiz again. The hummingbirds could not be counted on to appear on schedule. Someone took me to a tree one dusk and hummingbirds buzzed about like crazy. A week later I took a few members of my mystics class to the same spot, where only one appeared after a very long wait. The tiny delicate hummingbird's engine-like whir came to be an emblem of a joyful creator's sense of humor–a constant spiritual outpouring of the unexpected, visible when, perhaps, it's least expected, but nonetheless, looked for with "eyes to see."

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This was the effervescent side of faith that I encountered, but I soon learned that there was a necessary second half: the joy of encountering infinity in mystery.

Glancing at one of artist Georgia O'Keeffe's early abstract watercolors during a meditation-with-icons session in "Praying with the Mystics," the following words arose in my mind: "Come in. It looks dark, but it's beautiful darkness." The white shape surrounding the velvety black in O'Keeffe's painting resembles a shepherd's crook. Later in the day, when I was reading Thomas Merton, I came smack up against these words: "If we enter into ourselves and find our true self and then pass the inner 'I,' we sail forth into the immense darkness in which we confront the 'I AM' of the Almighty."

The inexplicable beautiful union of knowing and not knowing that I experienced during those four weeks was not incongruous with the physical environment of Ghost Ranch, described in its brochure as an oasis amidst desert. Hikes often revealed the most exquisite desert flowers pushing up through parched red earth. Walking the area surrounding O'Keeffe's old house, I came across just such a flower and immediately thought of her words, "Nobody sees a flower really—it is so small—we haven't the time, and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time." My taking the time to see and seek during this brief sojourn in the desert taught me that time must continue to be taken if flowers in the desert, those surprises of the spirit, are to be stumbled upon and appreciated.

Separating Heaven & Earth

Corrine De Winter

Do not disturb us,
You who walk the stark fields
Of early Autumn
Beneath a slate sky.
You who trespass the border
Separating heaven & earth.

It has found you
Even as mortality
Waved you on.

Do not disturb we
Who have wings,
Who feed on wilderness & time.
We are thorns of wild rose.
We are wind
And white feathers.
We are running deer,
Beauty fallen
from God's palm.

And you have broken us
With your human ego.

Corrine De Winter is a longtime contributor to SACRED JOURNEY. *She lives in Massachusetts.*

The Spiritual Reader

Kenneth O'Keefe

Cuffed to flesh I felt like a prisoner,
My soul sewn to sinew and chained to bone.
To escape this feral resolve of matter
As sensitive to Spirit as stone,
I studied the mystics with great fervor.
I sat at my small desk each night alone,
Believing I could burst into the Unknown.
If I should break through a saint's line of words—
Literally squeeze through them to the other side—
I would know the freedom of air swimming birds.
Then one night while reading I felt myself slide
Right through the O in Oneness to where
Fire dissolved the passion of my human pride,
Illuminating the love that was always there.

Kenneth O'Keefe is a retired teacher with a lifelong interest in literature. He finds spending time with his wife, reading, viewing films, and taking long solitary walks of great consolation. He lives in Pennsylvania.

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Vol. 52, No. 5

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ISSN 1096-5939

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